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# ANTOINE JOSEPH WIERTZ.

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## II.—THE WIERTZ MUSEUM.



DESCRIPTION of the Museum Wiertz, at Brussels, is in many points difficult, for the reason that where we describe a thing in words we do it largely by comparison, and here no parallel exists from which to draw the likeness. This Museum is almost unique in being a collection of the works of a single artist,—the Thorwaldsen Museum in Copenhagen being the only other one of the kind that I have seen,—and it is entirely unique in its medley of the ghastly and horrible, the tragical and whimsical, the fantastic and grotesque. Everything was ransacked by Wiertz to furnish subjects for his pictures. History, Scripture, mythology,—the real and the imaginary,—war, witchcraft, idyllic and prosaic life,—all are represented here.

The Museum is situated upon elevated ground, the Zoölogical Garden making a charming background for it. I first visited it in early autumn, when the vivid coloring of the luxuriant vines which cling to its broken walls was more brilliant than the dreams of the artist himself. One of the peculiar fancies of Wiertz was the imitation, in building the Museum, of a ruined temple at Pæstum. The walls have the appearance of tumbling into decay, and detached columns, seen against the surrounding verdure, add to the illusion of the design, and are most effective as one approaches and catches glimpses of the whole through openings in the groups of trees.<sup>1</sup> The entrance to the principal gallery is through an anteroom, where the custodian is found. Here are the register for strangers, photographs of the works within, and various articles—palettes, easels, and all that—formerly used by the artist. Here too are portfolios of sketches, the wood-engravings made in childhood, and a portrait of the remarkable man whose spirit fills all the place. This picture represents him in a sitting posture, with folded arms; the face is in profile, and he appears to be reading this motto, which is written beside him: “La critique en matière de peinture, est-elle possible?” The head has an air of refinement, and the small and regular features reveal the self-consciousness, as well as the individuality, of Wiertz. The Museum (formerly studio) is a large hall, high, and lighted from above. The end opposite the entrance has its corners taken off by white screens. Besides the pictures on the walls, there are a few models for sculpture and some seats for visitors. The pictures are hung with a certain sort of system, the upper ones being mostly colossal in size and dusky in color. Lower down are smaller works, usually in *peinture mate*, of less sombre effect, and much varied in character. This arrangement is, however, without positive regularity.

<sup>1</sup> The Museum is described here as I saw it a number of years ago. But a writer in the *Magazine of Art* for February, 1880, says that “the house and garden have been sold as private property, and all that remains of the temple is four columns, the present ‘Museum’ being the wing of the house comprising the painter’s former studio.”

I cannot say how much of the impression made upon me as I entered here was due to what I already knew of the man whose monument this Museum is, but I quite understand what Grimm means when he says: "One does not visit the Atelier Wiertz as one goes to the Sixtine Chapel or the Stanze of the Vatican. One goes rather in the spirit in which the variety theatre or the circus is visited." But it would be an injustice not to add that now, after other visits and the lapse of years, the effect of the serious and philosophic in the artist's works, and the irresistible impression made by his unquestionable genius, are what remain with me, while his grotesque and exaggerated pictures seem to have been the recreations of an habitually over-earnest man.

For the purpose of examining the works of Wiertz, it will be better to classify them at least approximately. They may be put under six heads, viz. Scriptural, Antique, Modern, Dramatic, Philosophic, and Comic. This classification will at first sight seem odd, as an antique subject may be dramatic, etc., as well as a modern one. But its meaning will readily be understood from what follows.

Of the scriptural subjects, *The Revolt of Hell against Heaven* (45 by 30 feet), *The Education of the Virgin*, *The Sleep of the Infant Jesus*, and *The Flight into Egypt*, seem to be treated as *sujets de convenance*, and in a large degree resemble other representations of these subjects. I shall say nothing of them, since so many more original works demand attention.

Two immense canvases, painted in oil, and called *The Beacon of Golgotha* and *The Triumph of Christ*, are of a more individual type; while they are in a sense scriptural, they are also symbolic or allegorical. The first might be also called an "Elevation of the Cross." A centurion, whipping some slaves in order to compel them to raise the cross with its holy burden, represents Despotism; the Christ is surrounded by a light which reveals a mass of demons, led by Satan himself, who attempt to prevent the slaves from accomplishing their task. The Light of the world and the struggle between good and evil are here typified, and the effect is so great that the spectator feels, when studying the picture, a strong personal interest,—as if he must aid in this great battle against the Devil and his hellish crew.

*The Triumph of Christ* is often called the *chef-d'œuvre* of Wiertz. It was painted in an abandoned factory, that being the only place he could find where the colossal canvas could be spread. As soon as it was exhibited in Brussels, its importance was felt, and doubtless this work was the first cause of the decision of the government to build for him the studio of which he had so long dreamed. It gave him the highest rank among the artists of his time, and he is said to have refused the offer of a sum equal to thirty thousand dollars for it. It represents Christ Crucified, surrounded by an army of archangels, who descend from the upper air to drive Satan and the rebel angels into the flames beneath. The head of Christ, the figure of St. Michael, and that of the Devil are worthy of note; the latter is represented as still of celestial beauty, a suggestive thought, which adds much to the effectiveness of the picture. The manner in which this work was received probably made the brightest spot in the life of Wiertz; the critics praised the philosophical conception of the subject, as well as its execution, and from the time of its completion even the bitterest opponents of the artist acknowledged his genius.

Of his antique subjects, the *Patroclus* is the most important, and enough has already been said of it to indicate how seriously good judges differ regarding its merits. Undoubtedly the one now in the Museum is far better than that which he painted in Rome. *The Homeric Struggle* is the title given to another picture, which was executed with especial reference to the exhibition of the *peinture mate*, soon after its discovery. In the background a battle is going on; in the foreground two warriors are in a close struggle, while Venus and Minerva each attempt to aid their favorites in the combat. *The Forge of Vulcan*, *Bathers and Satyrs*, and *Polyphemus eating the Companions of Ulysses*, complete the subjects of this class.

The last named is in *peinture mate*, and nearly fills the space between the floor and the roof of

the hall. The purpose of this design is to show the contrast between brute force and intellect in the figures of the Cyclops and Ulysses. The former is in strong light, while the latter is in shadow. The enormous size of the giant may be imagined when the distance from his great toe to his heel is given as six and a half feet. It is needless to say that these colossal proportions, combined with the disagreeableness of the representation, (the Cyclops is crushing a man between his horrid teeth,) almost prevent one from seeking out the virtues or faults of the work, and it only engenders wonder at the man who could thus occupy himself during all the time required for such a painting.

The modern or genre subjects in the Museum number fifteen, but we cannot speak of them all. *Esmeralda*, *Quasimodo*, and *A Young Girl at her Toilet* are not strongly marked with the peculiarities of Wiertz. *Two Young Girls, or the Beautiful Rosine*, is a very original composition. It represents a charming girl, partly nude, regarding a hideous skeleton which is nailed to the wall and bears a label marked "La Belle Rosine." The contrast of the fresh, palpitating beauty of the living maiden—her color and grace, her blond hair adorned with flowers, and her pose admirably telling of her activity—with the dreadful remnant of Rosine, once as beautiful as the living girl is now, certainly points with emphasis the great truth we have all been learning since life and death were known to us. *The Rose Bud*, *The Confidence*, *The Waiting*, and some others, all represent beautiful girls, and prove that Wiertz had not studied terror and strength only. Perhaps his representations of female beauty too often suggest voluptuousness, and it is certainly true that these lighter and brighter themes are far inferior, under this artist's treatment, to his dramatic and philosophical motives. *The Ambuscade* pictures a young girl who plucks a rose from a bush in which a Cupid is concealed, who points an arrow at her heart. *More Philosophic than it seems* is the original title this lonely man gave to his representation of two lovers, who, seated in the midst of a glowing landscape, are clasped in each other's arms and seal their confessions with a kiss. Wiertz seems, by this picture and his naming of it, to admit that love has more of true philosophy than found expression in his own life.

The dramatic subjects, or, as they are called in the Museum catalogue, "Drames et Satires," all make a point against some wrong or folly of modern life; and in these works it seems to me that we see Wiertz at his best.

The *Burnt Child* represents a poor woman who has been forced to leave her baby alone in its cradle, while she went out to attend to her affairs, and on returning finds the child burned to death. She has seized it from the flames, but too late,—“the angel has retaken the path to heaven.” A touching detail is a toy which, out of her poverty, she had managed to buy, and is seen in the basket of provisions which she has dropped on the floor. Nothing could more forcibly present the anxieties which mothers of the poorer classes must suffer when forced to leave their babes alone, and thus expose them to the fatal dangers to which they are often victims. Wiertz painted this picture for the purpose of arousing attention to the subject, that something might be done to provide care for these babies of the poor. *The Orphans*, a very powerful picture, was first exhibited at a concert which the artist gave in his studio, in 1863, for the benefit of the victims of a terrible catastrophe,—the falling of a building in the Quartier Louise. When the first part of the musical programme had been performed, Wiertz unveiled this picture, which bore the inscription, "An Appeal to Benevolence." The scene represented is the home of a poor family at the moment when the father is to be removed forever. Two common-looking men are taking away the rude coffin; the older children are struggling with them, and try to prevent the removal of the loved remains; the mother of these wild young creatures is overcome by a grief which, although less demonstrative, is quite as powerful, while the youngest child, a girl with a doll in her arms, too young to be able to realize the situation, clings to her mother's skirts in unconscious despair. In design and execution this is one of the best works in the collection. The artist was so carried out of himself

by his intense interest in his subject, that Rubens and all others were forgotten. The result gives us nature, individual expression, good drawing, and strong, rich color. It is needless to say that he received a large subscription for the poor from those who attended his unique "concert."

*The Civilization of the Nineteenth Century* is a bitter protest against the horrors of war. It presents a young mother, with her babe in her arms, about to leap into eternity from an open window, in order to escape from two French soldiers, who have brought her to bay with levelled muskets. Their horrid faces are far more frightful than any death; she places one knee on the sill,—she sways forward!—we will look no longer! *The Genius of War* is embodied in a good portrait of the first Napoleon. There he stands, in a realistic hell. Flames issue from his very vitals,—the mothers, sweethearts, wives, and children of those he has caused to be slain, present to him human flesh to eat, human blood to drink! Still, there he stands,—immovable,—with closely set lips, and seems to say, "I may burn,—I may suffer the extreme anguish of the damned; but I will still sacrifice all to my ambition." *The Blow from the Hand of a Belgian Woman* pictures a richly-dressed woman trying to escape from a French soldier (always the French, whom Wiertz hated), who has already torn her garments from her shoulders. She fires a pistol in his face,—his head is a hideous horror. Can imagination go beyond these representations? And, in spite of all their emphasis, do they exceed the truth? Wiertz was, indeed, a mighty preacher with his brush!

I have said that the corners of the hall are cut off by low, white screens. In these are small, glazed apertures, through which one must look in order to see what the screens conceal. Through one peep-hole is seen a man who has been prematurely buried during a cholera epidemic. He is bursting open his coffin and endeavoring to free himself from his horrible confinement. In his movements he has upset another coffin, and the whole scene is full of all the terror and shuddering fear which could possibly be put into it. Again, we see a mad woman, who is cutting up and cooking her babe. She has lost her reason through suffering and poverty, and her face is the perfect impersonation of devilish madness. Her fearful smile, her glittering teeth, leaden color, and protruding eyes, set before you insanity in all its truth and all its frightfulness. It is said that, when Wiertz was reproached with its hideousness, he calmly replied: "Does it exist? My picture overcomes you? Well, then, abolish these monstrosities from society. You can do it, you privileged ones; by your alms, by your gifts, by your persevering charities, make my picture a horrible fiction, and I will destroy it and you shall see it no more." This resembles the famous reply of Michelangelo to Paul III., and may have been suggested to Wiertz by it: "Tell the Pope that the thing which grieves him is only a misery which may be easily cured; let him change the world, then pictures will change." A third of these half-concealed pictures shows a young girl reclining upon her bed and reading. The title, *The Reader of Romance*, tells what it is that seems to enchain her by its spell. She is surrounded by that misty sort of half light which is full of charm, either in nature or art. She has read all night, and the dawn, which now steals in, finds her still intoxicated with the wickedness which the book reveals to her,—for we are made to know that it is wicked by the presence of a very handsome Satan, whose horns rise above abundant curling locks. He pushes toward the maiden still other volumes, and gloats over the working of the subtle poison they contain. I think the force and meaning of this scene are more patent to the usual sight-seer than are those of the other satirical works. What a pity that the Devil cannot always be seen when such books are about! What a good view of him might be had in some circulating and other public libraries, as well as in the more private places where people shut themselves up to read them! Certainly, in spite of his remarkably *outré* manner, Wiertz tells truth with wonderful correctness.

These are the most important of the screened pictures, and all that our space will allow us to describe. It is difficult, nay, almost impossible, to give a judgment upon the artistic merits

of these works. The tricks employed in their arrangement preclude a fair sight of them, while their effect is greatly enhanced. Is the startling hue of color on the face of the man in the coffin, and on that of the mad woman, what it would be if they were placed as other pictures are? If so, it is miraculous. And the wonderful blending of the shadow with the light about the figure of the reading girl? this soft penumbra? If it is the just effect of the painting, and not that of a deceit, it should be more clearly shown.

Another dramatic theme is *The Thoughts and Visions of a Human Head during Three Minutes after it is severed from the Body*. My powers of word painting are too limited to serve me in a description of the three pictures which illustrate this theme. I will only quote what the artist wrote of them to a friend: "Perhaps my painting will one day furnish an argument against the death penalty. I hope so."

Among the subjects which I class as philosophic, there are six cartoons, scenes from family life, prepared as illustrations of some poems by M. Charles Potvin; and two others which represent political and religious authority so pictured as to be condemned by Christ, and again so as to be approved by him. These two political cartoons were the last works of the artist. *La Liberté*, of August 27, 1865, says of the first: "The design of this sublime composition is at the height of the ideal. It is grand, broad, and learned. The foreshortening of the arms is so true and so well managed, that one does not perceive it until he comes to examine into the mode of representing so many objects upon an insufficient canvas. The hands of Christ are beautiful with that severe and historic beauty which admits of no tricks in design. The head of Jesus, in part concealed (by his veiling his face from the sights around him), is seen sufficiently to indicate that it is of the most lofty character. The draperies are treated with that skilful ease and readiness which conceal long reflection under the appearance of *abandon* and negligence in the inferior details."

Of the purely symbolic and philosophic subjects which remain, the following are particularly deserving of mention: — *The Last Cannon*, which typifies the time when civilization and peace shall displace war and all contention; *The Things of the Present before the Men of the Future*; *Human Power has no Limits*; and *On se retrouve au Ciel* (We meet again in Heaven). In the lower part of the last-named canvas are three groups of those who have passed from this to the spirit world. The principal one represents a mother receiving her son, for whom she has long watched, and whom she now welcomes to heaven; she embraces and kisses him, and a tear of joy is on her cheek, caused by the glad thought that her child is hers forever. At the left, a young girl who enters paradise is received by her father and mother, while on the right, an old couple are in ecstasy at being united to a noble son in the flower of manly beauty. The music of the skies is indicated by the pipes of an organ seen in the luminous ether above. This picture affords us one of the few glimpses we get of the soul and the strong sentiment of humanity which we are sure that this strange artist possessed. It was the only work in the whole collection that caused me to shed a tear. I might have attributed this to personal feeling of the separation from friends common to all travellers, especially when in foreign lands; but I find that Grimm says: "Es ist die einzige seiner Arbeiten die wirklich das Herz trifft." Wiertz wished to give this picture to the church at Dinant (his native city), which was probably that in which he was christened. The women painted by Wiertz were often expressionless, but in the case of this sainted mother nothing more could be desired.

We have still to regard the comic side of this artist, which is shown in various little surprises in different parts of the Museum. The most outspoken of his amusing works is the representation of the fairy tale of *The Three Wishes* which were allowed a poor couple. The old woman, driven by hunger, improved the first opportunity by wishing for a sausage; the old man, angry that she could not control her appetite and wish for more enduring blessings, declared that he wished the sausage were hung to her nose, which dreadful desire was instantly fulfilled! Just here, when this climax of evil was reached, the artist has painted the two. The





A. J. WIERTZ, PINX.

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ON SE RETROUVE AU CIEL.

richly-dressed fairy waves her wand,—the sausage is made fast to the nose of the old woman, and her husband is fairly enraged by the thought that the third and last wish must be improved to unfasten the dreadful annex from the face of his unfortunate wife. It is quite ludicrous enough to cause a laugh, even though on the same wall with Napoleon in hell.

The portfolios of designs in this Museum are of much interest, as are also the models for sculpture. Wiertz put none of his conceptions into marble, although he intended to do so, and in colossal size. The subjects represented are *Fraternity*, *The Bathers*, *An Amazon*, *A Repast of Serpents*, and a series of four groups illustrating *The History of Humanity*.

Many comparisons have been made by various critics between Wiertz and other artists. It would, I fancy, be impossible that any human being should be absolutely without resemblance to any other, but, as I have read and studied Antoine Joseph Wiertz, it seems to me that he is as entirely unique as any man could be, and yet be a man. He has been likened to Rubens, who made the third figure in the trio which Wiertz admired, namely, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Rubens. He certainly resembled or imitated Rubens in many ways. He had much of the power of that master in the grouping of masses of figures and in the use of color, but he never attained to a comparison with him in the painting of human flesh. Taken all in all, his figures are more refined than those of Rubens, although the voluptuous is very *prononcé* in Wiertz, but his color and his power of giving individuality of expression are in no sense approximate to the same qualities in the great Fleming.

Wiertz has also been compared to William Blake, and does resemble that poetic artist in the weirdness and originality of his conceptions. Like Blake, too, he had the power to make what is unreal to us seem as if it must have been absolutely real to himself. But here, to my mind, the likeness ends. The spiritual refinement of Blake was not approached by Wiertz, any more than the power of execution of the latter was reached by Blake.

Again, Wiertz is said to be like Benjamin Robert Haydon. For myself, I only find a resemblance in the vanity and self-conceit of the two men. I cannot imagine that Haydon, with his natural imperfectness of sight, could ever have dreamed of such waves of color as seem to have floated continually before the vision of Wiertz. To be sure, Haydon suffered from the want of such generous aid as that which Wiertz received from the Belgian government, and we must accord to him a superior courage (or cowardice?) which enabled him to seek death, of which Wiertz, as his biographer informs us, stood in great fear.

I would advise travellers to accept no critic's opinion of this artist; the study of his works alone can reveal to one the power and originality of his genius and character. But for those who only have the opportunity to read, the above comparisons may not be useless.

CLARA ERSKINE CLEMENT.

